



labour
transformed

Political Basis Document

December 2020



Political Basis

The surprise election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 saw an influx of socialists into the Labour Party. In the interceding years, inside the Labour Party and in a related ecology of groups, a vibrant anticapitalist counterculture emerged, which, in the final accounting, failed to cohere into an organised form.

Those composing this culture made up a proto-tendency sharing many of the aims and objectives with socialists already in the party whom they encountered in Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and the Party's affiliated trade unions. However, this tendency differed in its comprehension of and faith in a parliamentary route to socialism. While ill-defined, this tendency was informed by the logics of both the New Left and extra-parliamentary forms of organisation that had dominated social movements in the preceding decades, placing an emphasis on participatory forms of democracy and decision-making, struggle 'led from below,'

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rank-and-file organisation, and the platforming of the voices and experiences of marginalised communities. Alongside more politically conscious actors, a generation of young people found in Corbynism an important element in their politicisation. Despite these promising developments, there was—and still is—a necessity to create a form through which these radical left politics can cohere.

The defeat of the Labour Party at the ballot box in 2019—and the replacement of its radical leadership by that of Keir Starmer and a more centrist programme—has precluded, for now, any experiment with parliamentary socialism, and has left many militants in the party struggling to make sense of why they should remain in it at all.

labour transformed is intended as an attempt to develop the radical strands within Corbynism and to provide an outward-facing and organised form for this tendency that can strategically cohere activity within and outside of the party. It is our contention that until a thoroughgoing attempt at this is made, we cannot collectively assess the continued utility of the party. In a context where this radical tendency remains atomised, there is a need for an agile cadre organisation that could help it to cohere within the party and beyond.

Transforming the Labour Party is just one part of a larger task of a socialist project. Hence our name does not refer to our struggle within the Labour Party alone but is also a reference to the long-held task of socialists; to liberate humanity from the bondage of capitalist work and a society based on production for profit.

labour transformed is a socialist and anti-capitalist organisation, premised on the principle of meaningful action, that which increases the confidence, initiative, autonomy, solidarity and self-determination of the working class in its struggles against capitalism and other forms of oppression.

The position of **labour transformed** towards the party, the state, and the trade unions is in and against, as outlined in this document. Our analysis here is the outcome of an ongoing process of collective debate and mutual education. This analysis and the concepts used in it are therefore open to debate and revision. One aspect of participation in labour transformed is contributing to the work of improving and expanding this analysis, which stands as the political basis for our continued working together.

1 SOCIALISM, CAPITALISM, AND THE STATE

1 Socialism, capitalism, and the state

Socialism has referred to different social formations in different historical contexts. Here we outline our conceptions of class, socialism, and the capitalist state.

1.1 Class

labour transformed adopts the notion of class composition from the Italian Marxist tradition of *operaismo* as a useful way of thinking about the coherence and self-formation of the working class. One common conception of class is that it is pre-existing and latent in the organisation of social relations under capitalism, awaiting the awakening of class consciousness. This model furthermore tends to presuppose a coherent, self-identical working class, rather than recognising the contradictory tendencies that exist under capitalism. These tendencies include the atomisation of workers through the division of labour and promotion of competition between workers, and the rentierisation of the economy that is shifting focus onto sites of struggle beyond production and the wage-relation. By contrast, the conception of class composition recognises ongoing processes of recomposition and politicisation through which the working class needs to constantly construct itself anew. Organising needs to bring together different fractions of the working class whose interests appear to be divided or even in conflict under the changing structural organisation of labour under capitalism.

This method of class analysis also has the advantage of rejecting the false dichotomy between class and liberation struggles. Like class, identity is not a selfsame or pre-existing category and does not automatically lead to politicisation but is constructed through experiences of often multiple overlapping oppressions. Far from being the necessary result of the capitalist structuring of labour, the working class needs to construct its unity by building solidarity and by organising to form coalitions among different fractions of those who are exploited and oppressed in antagonism with the capitalist class. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the capitalist class is also made up of different fractions with often contradictory interests. It may incorporate so-called transitional classes with an internally incoherent set of material and ideological positions that align partially with capital and partially with labour. It is therefore crucial to articulate links between different elements that may be unified under specific material conditions.

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1.2 Capitalism and socialism

Socialism is distinct from liberalism, which continues to subordinate freedom to other goals (not least private property or the market), whereas socialism is the liberation of the proletariat as a class from its alienation and exploitation under capitalist social relations. This unfreedom results from the fact that, under capitalism, workers are alienated from the products of their labour and from their own productive capacity, leading to the reduction of life and work to one another. Capitalism also operates at an ideological level to interpellate subjects and thereby to divide and depoliticise the proletariat as a class. For these reasons, socialism cannot content itself with doing away with private property or merely ameliorating the effects of capitalist social relations but must strive for their abolition altogether. For socialists, need—rather than profit—is the driver of production. To truly democratise the economy would require a free association of producers who consciously plan production and distribution. Moreover, insofar as capitalism is a globalised and self-expanding system, socialism in one country is impossible to sustain when it is under siege. Socialism necessarily is a transnationalist project.

1 SOCIALISM, CAPITALISM, AND THE STATE

The forms that socialism takes are historically contingent. The task of socialism is to abolish capitalism as a system of production, accumulation, and generalised exchange, and at the same time to abolish the specific form that capitalism takes at a particular historical juncture. The range of past and present nominally socialist projects have focussed on capturing the means of production. However, the abolition of private property does not necessarily lead to the abolition of capitalist social relations. Even where these projects have attempted to eliminate the free market by bringing distribution and circulation under the control of the state, they fail to transform the underlying relations of production.

At the current moment, after decades of the neoliberal policies that have fractured workers' movements across the globe, socialism could not seem farther away. In the Global North, a revolutionary conjuncture does not seem imminent and even if it were, the organised left is currently in no position to capture its potential. Corbynism represented a vital step in re-galvanising the British left, but it must be understood for what it was: a social democratic platform to be enacted through the British state that used the language of socialism for strategic and rhetorical purposes. The idea of socialism was a driving inspiration behind Corbynism, enabling the Labour Party under Corbyn to become a significant site of class struggle in Britain, particularly in the absence of a revival of organised labour. What must be made clear, however, is that there is a distinct qualitative difference between social-democratic reforms and socialism; it is not simply a question of gradation.

1.3 The state

The state is the mechanism by which the ruling class secures and maintains domination over the working classes and one of the means by which it organises itself internally. It is not a static institution but a process by which class relations are transformed into institutional forms—forms which are historically contingent. Even when it appears to take a democratic or parliamentary form, it nonetheless functions as an instrument of class dictatorship at both a national and international level, which means that class struggle necessarily sets itself *against* the state, aiming ultimately for its abolition. The formal rights won through working-class struggle or granted by the state are not sufficient in themselves for building the power necessary for the liberation of the working classes and may often obscure the extent to which the state excludes those it is meant to represent. Therefore, socialists must go beyond the liberal ambition for greater recognition within the existing structures of the state and instead seek its radical overcoming.

At the same time, the state is not exclusively an instrument for class rule and it will be necessary for the working class to win control of the state so as to weaken the coercive power of its repressive apparatuses (be that the police, the armed forces, the prison system, the border force, the restrictive social security regime, even the Department for Education) to fend off other reactionary countermoves within the state and to create a transitional structure of power that is more democratic. Socialists must work *in* as well as *against* the state—*in* it so as to redirect the state's resources towards building working-class power and autonomy. Many of the organs of the state we inherit are fulfilling necessary functions for the survival of the working class and to that extent are worth defending as a qualified good, but at the same time they play a distinct role in reproducing, disciplining, and conditioning labour. The task for socialists is not solely to defend these institutions or expand their power under socialist control but to work outside or against the state to support the development of counter-institutions that do not reproduce the disciplinary logics of capitalism or the state.

It is also necessary to work against the state *from within* in order to transform this structure into one that necessarily seeks to make itself irrelevant with the ultimate abolition of class exploitation. Socialists who work within the state are vulnerable to co-option, and it is, therefore, necessary to build organised countervailing power to exert pressure on them to counteract those influences. In that way, an in and against strategy can allow the state to wither away and pave the way for collective self-governing through freer forms of association.

2 TRADE UNIONS

2 Trade unions

Trade unions are an integral part of the international class struggle. Although they are the central means for collective organisation of workers, the ways in which trade unions operate must be understood as imperfect expressions of worker organisation.

2.1 The unions and the Labour Party

Without effective organising inside Labour Party affiliated trade unions, many trade union leaders will continue to be part of a formal alliance opposing socialist policies and reform to the Party. Despite a growing recognition of past Labour governments either condoning or leading attacks on the working class and on organised labour, this formal alliance has endured. It is arguable that, in the event of a Labour government, an arrangement whereby the unions are effectively incorporated into the state would be more appealing to the majority of the union leaderships than would a repeal of anti-trade union laws (however, this kind of settlement is unlikely to be possible nor desirable now the era of the mass industrial worker has ended). Such a repeal would greatly increase the working class's capacity to act. **labour transformed** seeks to make links between trade union activists and socialists within the Labour Party through meaningful and democratic means so as to assert within the party the interests of workers and their communities. We recognise the necessity of tying workplace and community organising together. Our engagement must escape the limitations the left has historically faced within the Party, moving beyond crude electoralism or a defence of labourism that sidelines workplace and community struggle. If labour movement office holders are not adequately representing the interests of workers and their communities, we should seek to replace them with people who will.

2.2 What does meaningful trade unionism look like?

Trade unions should be perceived and approached not as monolithic entities but as sites of struggle. However, this struggle should not be limited to securing key positions at the various levels of a union. The current limitations of trade unions are structural and cannot be explained away by focussing on individuals whose material interests are seen to no longer align with those they are paid there is the host of anti-trade union laws that have been introduced to make it difficult for workers and their unions to strike, to stop them offering solidarity to other workers, and to restrict their ability to recruit, organise, and represent their members. Alongside repressive legislation aimed at curtailing the power of unions to offer cross-union solidarity, there is also the movement's lack of meaningful internal democracy, the competition between trade unions, and the larger structural forces that hinder rank and file activity. All of this conspires to keep militants atomised.

Idealised conceptions of the trade union movement must therefore be rejected. Where a trade union organisation fails or actively obstructs the cause of socialism, we must have no hesitation in criticising and seeking to reform it. To achieve a transformative balance of power within the official trade union movement, it is vital that the transactional nature that recreates trade union establishments is strategically disrupted, effectively contested, undermined and organised against.

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Debates inside British trade unionism must move beyond superficial analyses and destructive anti-intellectualism. Activity must focus on strengthening the political understanding and organic knowledge of workers, to enable the development of a network of activists who are highly skilled, politically educated, class-conscious, and equipped organisers. Popular education and inquiry led by workers themselves have a vital role to play in transforming power in our workplaces and in our communities. The nature of work and life is becoming more precarious, with collective forms of power such as strikes and trade unionism reaching historic lows.

While the direct democracy and combative nature of base unions are inspiring and have restored a sense of possibility, many activists within these forms perceive the official trade union movement to be a homogeneous, hegemonic, and hostile block. We seek to open communication between base unions and militants within the official trade union movement, allowing us to share tactics, campaigns, and build tactical alliances.

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Our trade unionism positions capitalism and the bosses as the enemy, not merely as forces to be negotiated with. Traditional ameliorative forms of bargaining, while necessary, are insufficient in reconfiguring the relationship between capital and labour. Where democratic structures are constitutionally enshrined, an unevenness or a lack of engagement undermines this potential. We need to organise across these institutional lines, building a network of coordinated socialists. This will mean engaging with existing organisations and networks within the unions,

while building new organisations where they are lacking.

To challenge the continuing fragmentation of our class and strengthen its capacity to act in its own interest, **labour transformed** intends to develop strategy forums to foster lines of communication and effective solidarity between community organisations and workplace struggles. We must keep abreast of relevant knowledge of the contested and varied internal politics of the different unions, the relationships between them, the strategic and tactical approaches of different parts of the labour movement, and the challenges and constraints they face. We call this social movement unionism.

3 THE BRITISH STATE AND THE LABOUR PARTY

3 The British state and the Labour Party

For centuries, the absence of revolution or major military defeat has exempted the British state from radical reform. It remains defined by the two fundamental needs of the British ruling class at its global apex: to govern a global empire and subordinate the world's first industrial working class. Since the defeat of Chartism, the main organisations of the British labour movement have largely failed to reform democratically or even strongly criticise the constitution of the British state.

At the end of the nineteenth century, organised labour sought parliamentary representation to defend its interests against legal attack. But history has repeatedly shown Parliament's capacity to absorb and domesticate the elected representatives of labour. It is a terrain hostile to socialism and socialists, and one which Labour has repeatedly neglected to transform. Successive Labour governments have not replaced archaic, elitist and anti-democratic features of the constitution, such as an unjust electoral system, an unelected second chamber, a hereditary head of state, an overly powerful executive, and an opaque culture and procedures that mystify its processes to insulate it from popular-democratic pressure.

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Two other features of the British state—also unreformed by Labour—obstruct socialist politics. First, an extreme centralisation of state power that radically limits the scope for local democratic initiatives and denudes local government of meaningful autonomy, particularly since the Thatcherite offensive against it in the late 1980s. Second, a central state bureaucracy which acts as an institutional opponent to the more radical elements in Labour governments and—through the Treasury/Bank of England nexus—guarantees the primacy of the interests of the City of London in economic policy.

3.1 What is the Labour Party?

The Labour Party was founded to acquire political representation for trade union interests. This origin—embedded in its constitution—gives it an ongoing, mediated link to the organised working class unique in British politics. But trade unions have a basic limitation: they have to take capitalist class relations as a given framework within which to try and bargain for incremental gains. Labour copies this approach onto the political terrain, where it makes a virtue of taking as given the international, constitutional, national-cultural, and political-economic frameworks of British politics. These frameworks inhibit and fragment working class power. Yet rather than seeking to transform them—or to build and lead a socialist, working class movement capable of doing so—Labour instead tries to work realistically within them, seeking an imprimatur of credibility from the economic and media establishment that it hopes will combine with a desperation to end Conservative government so as to assemble a large enough voting bloc to carry it to electoral victory and legislate some limited social reforms.

Labour is not and has never been a socialist party. Labour has always contained socialists, but they have been mostly concentrated at its base and never numbered more than a small section of the PLP. Its opaque and undemocratic structures work against socialists acquiring meaningful power in the party and were designed to do so. Fear of socialists acquiring such power has usually caused right-wing party power holders to fight democratisation tooth and nail, while claiming to be motivated by a desire to protect the party's 'electability.' The means by which they fight, including outright sabotage, involve inflicting exactly the electoral damage they claim to be trying to prevent.

3 THE BRITISH STATE AND THE LABOUR PARTY

Labourism is Labour's broadly prevailing ideology, capable of different inflections but always within the following essential coordinates. First, there is an adherence to the general political approach outlined above. Second, a related desire to be a national party 'above' class conflict, not a party that explicitly aims to organise working class hegemony, and to substitute class accommodation 'in the national interest' for class struggle. Third, there is at least a neglect of—and often an active hostility to—the kind of initiatives essential to develop a broad, socialist, working-class movement and to generate a dynamic, mutually educative and radicalising relationship between party and class: political education, cultural and media initiatives, community organising, 'unparliamentary' tactics. This connects to a deep-seated anti-intellectualism and aversion to theory, whose function is to prevent party

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supporters learning from the party's (inglorious) past, from struggles abroad, or from history in general. Fourth, there is a deep aversion to internal democracy and mass participation precisely because it threatens to develop a dynamic party-class relationship which might lead both in a radical direction: away from seeking a reformist accommodation with capital and towards more transformative goals. Fifth, the subordination of all activity and all demands to the immediate priority of winning elections, on virtually whatever terms. Often, Labour's platform has amounted to little more than offering to manage British capitalism more efficiently and slightly more fairly than the Conservatives.

And yet even on its own, electoralist terms, the Labour Party's record is one of failure. Labour governments have tended to be brief, either collapsing in exhaustion having reached the limits of social reform (1945–51) or leading outright attacks on organised labour and the working class. Sometimes these have even started under a Labour government and contributed to its fall. Even so, despite this dismal record,

Labour's electoral position at Westminster—fortified against left-wing challengers by an electoral system that cements the duopoly of the two main parties—in combination with its abiding formal link to organised labour and its base of working-class support means it remains an important (though arduous and dispiriting) site of struggle for socialists in Britain today.

3.2 So why are we in the Labour Party?

Over the last four decades, workers in the UK have been atomised and diffused by the neoliberal-capitalist reorganisation of production and the deliberate destruction of working-class collective organisations and cultural life. These defeats have reduced workers' capacity for collective action. Meanwhile, economic, legal, and other structural changes have made it harder for trade union, community, and movement activism to find purchase. Strikes and trade union density have reached historic lows in the last decade, although small signs of recovery are emerging.

To even begin to address the massive imbalance of class power and its material consequences for the working class will require an enormous growth in collective working-class political activity from present levels. While we must work within current cultural, legal, and labour market conditions (no matter how challenging) to start bringing about that revival, we must also work to transform dramatically the very conditions within which we organise. Many of the necessary changes can only be made at the level of the state: repealing laws that restrict working-class self-activity, meeting basic needs by improving public provision of essential goods and services, democratising the constitution, opening up the Westminster party system, and devolving power away from Whitehall.

3 THE BRITISH STATE AND THE LABOUR PARTY

The electoral system still used for Westminster elections effectively precludes any mass electoral party of the working class in Britain besides Labour. Labour is not a shortcut to socialism, but *under present conditions* there is no path to the political revival of the working class which does not go partly through Labour. Labour is the weak link in the British constitution, a heavily guarded but crucial access point through which we must work to democratise the British state and secure other 'non-reformist reforms.'

3.3 What does meaningful activity look like in relation to the party?

There are two basic requirements for socialist activity in Labour. First, it must be systematically organised around a collective strategy, worked out openly and democratically. Second, it must be focused on tangibly and durably democratising the party's structures, practices, and internal life. This is not just a matter of securing rule changes, important as they are: it is a matter of developing forms of political activity largely foreign to, or neglected by, the party, of transforming personal relations and conduct, of seeking to develop each member's capacities, and of bringing the party into a direct and mutually developmental relationship with far more of the working class.

Activity inside Labour must not be seen in isolation from other forms of meaningful activity. We must fight against Labour's tendency to disparage virtually all essential forms of political activity that do not aim directly at getting party candidates elected. Direct action, militant anti-fascism, grassroots campaigns, and radical trade union struggles: all of these have essential roles to play in bringing about a revival of the working class.

Above all, our activity must always be guided by the principle that we are *socialists first and Labour members second*. We are partisans of a cause, not an organisation. Where the organisation fails the cause, or actively obstructs it, we must not hesitate to criticise it. Equally, under present conditions, we cannot give up the task of reforming it, no matter how difficult or unpromising. A Labour government is by no means necessarily a socialist government, and even a socialist government would not be able to transform society on its own. But a socialist government is a necessary condition of transforming society, and there is no route to one, under present conditions, which does not go through Labour.

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4 Anti-imperialism

Imperialism is value extraction from the periphery to the core. This is the economic foundation of imperialism. Modern capitalism is dependent on modern imperialism. There are other superstructural ways in which imperialism manifests, including narratives of 'Western civilisation' and the orientation of periphery cultures as relative to the core. What distinguishes

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an imperialist company is the support and advantages it receives from being *located in* and *identified with* the imperialist state. The imperialist state is one that exerts its power on the world economy on behalf of these national companies. This can

include, but goes well beyond, military power. The most clearly articulated expression of global imperialism is the hegemony of the US dollar.

4.1 International solidarity

The success of racialised electoral campaigns across the globe is a sign that the right has effectively shaped a critique of neoliberalism around racism and misogyny without ever questioning the capitalist mode of production. If the left is to become an effective bloc in solidarity *with* and an organic *part of* the oppressed, we must reject any tendency that dovetails with racism, however latent its form. In so doing we must critique the capitalist mode of production as a whole rather than merely the current expression of it—neoliberalism. Racism has been critical to the development of capitalism and therefore race cannot be subsidiary to class. Capitalism became the dominant mode of global production through the transatlantic slave trade. The primitive accumulation of capital was driven by colonial exploitation. This exploitation continues to this day through ongoing attempts to maintain profitability via imperialist exploitation of the periphery. The logic of capital is inseparable from its historical development.

Stratification of global production between rich and poor countries has led to lower costs of living for workers and cheaper inputs for businesses in the imperialist metropolises. Popular

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immigration controls have prevented an equalisation of rates of exploitation globally and deny migrant workers the same access to legal protections and public infrastructure that is granted to citizens. Borders are the material expression of this control on the movement and rights of workers, and they provide ideological support for solidarity at the level of the nation-state as opposed to the international working class. Furthermore, the racial categories created by historical and current imperial

and border regimes stratify and separate even 'native,' racialised populations, denying the universality that is so celebrated by liberal institutions.

4 ANTI-IMPERIALISM

As anti-imperialists, we are committed to a substantively internationalist socialism, based on real solidarity, and the elimination of the inequalities of power and wealth which divide the world. We acknowledge the legacies and ongoing material realities of empire and colonialism, from which Britain and other nations continue to benefit—to such widespread detriment and pain. We seek real cooperation with those who share our goals worldwide via the building of internationalist structures that criticise, and attempt to move beyond, the institutional logic of the nation-state. In any international matter, to the maximum extent possible, we shall seek to develop our analysis in dialogue with comrades in, or close to, the situation concerned. Our solidarity lies with democratic and working-class movements worldwide, and in their resistance to imperialist and non-imperialist powers, whether those powers are an alliance with Britain or not.

4.2 Labourism and imperialism

Labourism is characterised by blindness to imperialist exploitation abroad. Stemming from this, Labourism attempts to reconcile the class conflict between British-based workers and the bourgeoisie by recourse to the hyper-exploitation of workers based in the periphery. This often manifests through the rhetoric and the practice of all classes present in Britain coming together to build a better society, leaving unquestioned the relations of production that are central to these class antagonisms. We recognise that the main sites of struggle in Britain (the Labour Party and the trade unions) are inextricably and materially linked to British imperialism. The absence of a widespread critique of empire within these sites of struggle contributes to broad public approval of the British Empire and the general failure by the British left to criticise the City of London's role as the broker of global finance and the hub of contemporary British imperialism. **labour transformed** recognises these contradictions, the material resolution of which directs our approach to international solidarity, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism, even where these positions are considered unpopular with parts of the British electorate. We will not hesitate to disrupt, reverse and halt these logics acting inside the Labour party and the wider workers movement.

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About this document

This document is not the product of an unelected committee or the ‘front group’ of an existing socialist tendency but the outcome of a slow and deliberative process of conversation that was conducted across three working groups established by those who initially answered a call to found a new organisation of the radical left at the end of 2019.

Over the last year these working groups—one focused on trade unionism, another on the Labour Party, and another on race and anti-imperialism—have met regularly to discuss, debate, and mutually educate one another regarding what would constitute meaningful activity on each of those terrains. The groups were coordinated via encrypted messaging groups, online video conferencing calls, and, in the brief window between lockdowns, physical meetings. There will of course be blind spots and absences in this document, and we hope to address them as comrades alert us to them. At various junctures, working groups have been large, dynamic, and productive. At other times, they have been small, slow, and frustrating. In response to a call for the creation of a shared political basis for **labour transformed**’s future activity, each working group was tasked with composing its own section of this document. These were then circulated for input and amendments between the other working groups, before finally being brought together and condensed into one document by delegates drawn from each working group alongside members of a provisional coordination team.

Its production reflects our shared commitment to open and principled debate, through which an active and engaged membership can constitute a shared politics together, a process in direct opposition to a politics either dictated from above or inherited from dead tradition. This process is ongoing, and open to reflection, revision, and even abolition.

As such, the above categories outline the basis for our political cooperation in the months and years ahead. If you share these ideas, we urge you to join our organisation and aid us in developing strategy in line with our collective thinking.

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